

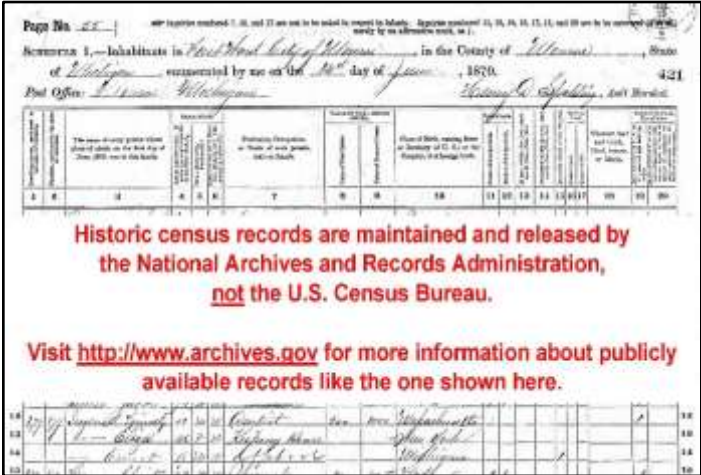
# Ernest Ingersoll

Naturalist, Biologist, and U.S. Census Bureau Surveyor

The U.S. Census Bureau has long been interested in measuring all aspects of the nation. In 1820, the census first expanded beyond demographics and began asking questions about manufacturing, which helped the young nation marshal its resources towards common economic goals. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, so too did the breadth of the census, encompassing vital statistics, communication, transportation, and all aspects of American life. In the late 1800's, several decennial censuses included studies on the nation's natural resources, such as forests, mines, and fisheries. Several of these first government naturalists and biologists realized that our shared resources could provide great benefits, but could also be exhausted if not treated properly. As a result, they issued reports that included ways to conserve resources and preserve the natural wilderness. The Census Bureau continued to measure the nation's lands, forests, fisheries, and other resources when it became a permanent agency in 1903, and soon began working with other agencies to help meet the federal government's data needs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



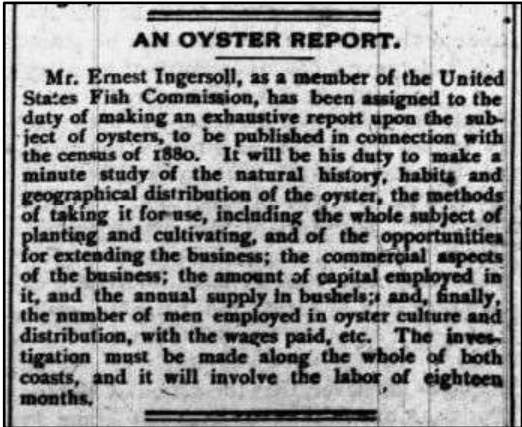
Wanamaker, John, *Book News: An Illustrated Magazine of Literature and Books*, Volume XXIV (1906).



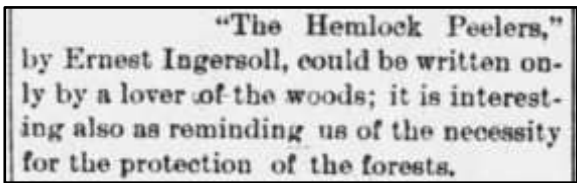
The Ingersoll family's 1870 Census.

Ernest Ingersoll was born on March 13, 1852, in Monroe, Michigan, where he spent much of his boyhood wandering through the countryside observing and collecting specimens. His father, Timothy, worked as a dentist, while his mother, Eliza, kept house. In 1867, Ernest entered Oberlin College in Ohio, where he studied science and curated the college museum until 1871. He next studied at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology with the famed biologist and naturalist, Louis Agassiz. In 1873, Ernest studied with Agassiz off the Massachusetts coast at Penikese Island, the forerunner to the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory.

In early 1874, Ernest earned praise for his writing about the recently deceased Agassiz and his research. Ernest then moved on from Harvard to his first government survey—the U.S. Geological and Geographic Survey of the Territories—under famed geologist Ferdinand V. Hayden, who had earlier conducted the first federal geological survey of what would become Yellowstone National Park. Ernest combined his research with his writing skills in several of the day's popular magazines and newspapers, thus greatly increasing recognition of him and his work.



The Buffalo Morning Express and Illustrated Buffalo Express (Buffalo, NY) October 29, 1879.



The News-Palladium (Benton Harbor, MI) June 7, 1889.

Ernest often traveled out west and wrote about his experiences, including one of the first scientific explorations of the pueblos at Mesa Verde, Colorado. He participated in a 1879 expedition in Colorado mining camps writing about not just the mining process, but also about the lifestyle of the miners. Ernest’s ability to describe the beauty of nature and the way humans interacted with it became his signature style, and encouraged readers to both enjoy and protect that beauty.

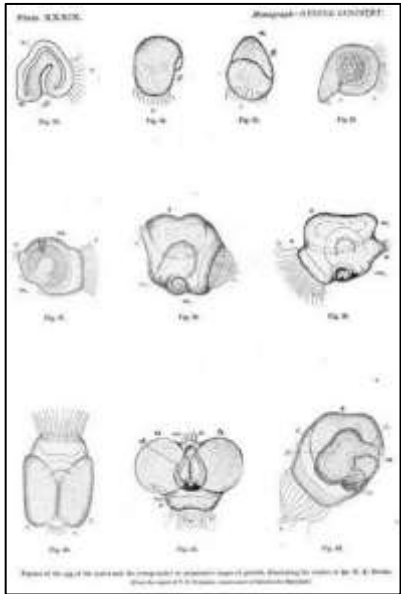
In 1879, Ernest once again joined a government survey, this time as head of the Oyster Fisheries Survey for the 1880 Census. The Census Bureau conducted the fishery surveys as a joint effort with the U.S. Fish Commission—as both offices fell under the Department of the Interior, the Census Bureau funded all of the field work, while the Fish Commission funded the compilation of the monographs. Ernest worked on the oyster survey, which also covered all other shellfish, from October 1879 to July 1881. He traveled extensively along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, using knowledge from his previous studies as well as that culled from other scientists and reports. Unfortunately, the time allotted did not allow him to visit and study every oyster-producing area of the United States.

Like his previous work, Ernest’s report not only covered all of the scientific and technical aspects of the oyster and shellfish fisheries, but the lifestyles of the people as well. He described cultures built around the various shellfish, with jobs passed from parents to children, community identities built around public crab, clam and oyster feasts, and the appeal of oysters, in particular, to people in all walks of life.

Ernest’s survey also followed another theme seen throughout his work, and even more so following his census work—that of environmental conservation. At this point, the main threat to oysters and other shellfish were other marine creatures, especially invasive species. However, Ernest also investigated other problems, such as degraded environments. His report noted that sewage and waste pollution caused oysters to disappear or be unfit for eating, and that mills, dams, and other changes to waterways caused runoff and silt accumulation that was also fatal to oyster beds. Ernest addressed several areas that had seen either contemporary or historical shellfish extinctions, and mentioned that despite the importance of such an event, too little was truly known about them. Although Ernest did not know it at the time, his work would be one of the few works depicting this fundamental part of American life, and would help illustrate the damage done to shellfisheries in later times.



Ingersoll, Ernest, *The Mentor: American Naturalists*, Vol. 7, Num. 9, Serial No. 181 (1919).



Depiction of oyster development in the 1880 Census report.

Following completion of his census work, Ernest continued to travel and write, covering a wide variety of topics, from his typical nature, lifestyle, and travel stories to city guides and a book on dragons. He also drew notice for the special attention he gave to conserving resources, highlighting wilderness spaces in his speeches and articles, and for preferring notes and photographs over harvesting specimens. Following years of heavy travel, Ernest settled in New York City in 1900, where he stayed for several decades before retiring from writing in 1938. He was a founder and member of several clubs, including the Linnean Society of New York (a club for naturalists), the National Association of Audubon Societies, the New York Zoological Society, the Explorers Club, and several other professional organizations. Ernest passed away on November 13, 1946, at a retirement home in Battleboro, Vermont. The Census Bureau is proud of Ernest’s pioneering work as a naturalist, government scientist, and environmental conservationist.